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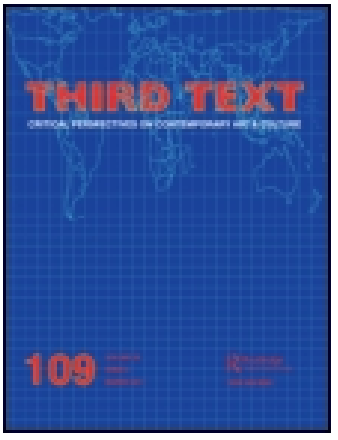

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Discovering the European wild men

Roger Bartra [a]
[a] Professor of Anthropology , Mexico City
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Discovering the European Wild Men

Roger Bartra

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For many centuries European wild men[1] lived almost exclusively in the mythical consciousness of the popular classes and were scorned by theology and science. It seems strange, therefore, that the wild man should reappear in the political and natural sciences of the 18th century in the form of Rousseau's noble savage and Linnaeus' *homo ferus*. The thought patterns of the Enlightenment clearly had their origins in the literary traditions of the Renaissance, in the works of Montaigne, Cervantes and Shakespeare who kept the myth of the wild man alive in characters such as the cannibal, Cardenio and Caliban. However, the main force behind the myth of the wild man in Enlightenment thinking cannot just be explained by focusing upon the persistence of folklore in literature: we need to search for other bridges which link the medieval myth to the modern one, for dark historical ties such as these can elucidate both the trajectory behind the continuity of the myth of the wild man and some new characteristics it begins to acquire.

One of those bridges has been curiously ignored by the few historians who have attended to the myth of the wild man, although it was frequently traversed by Romantic writers of the 19th century. Here I refer to the only treatise I know which has attempted to explain and define the existence of these strange prodigious men unconnected to Adam's stock. I refer to *Liber de nymphis, sylphis, pigmaeis et salamandris et de caeteris spiritibus* written by Paracelsus in the first half of the 16th century, where an explanation is elaborated of the nature of nymphs, sylphs or sylvani, pygmies, vulcans or salamanders.* The interpretation of this audacious Swiss physician is

1 A related reflection on this topic is my essay 'Identity and Wilderness: Ethnography and the History of an Imaginary Primitive Group', in *Ethnologia Europaea* 21, pp 103-123.

* I use the Spanish edition prepared by Pedro Gálvez: *Libro de las ninfas, los silfos, los pigmeos, las salamandras y los demás espíritus* de Philipus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, known as Paracelsus, (bilingual edition, Obelisco, Barcelona, 1983). The original German work can be read in volume 14, pp 115-151, of *Samtliche Werke*, 1. *Medizinische naturwissenschaftliche und philosophische*, the Karl Sudhoff edition, Munich — Berlin, 1922-1933. An English translation is found in *Four Treatises of Theophrastus von Hohenheim called Paracelsus*, edited by Henry E. Sigerist, The John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1941.

interesting precisely because it acknowledges the presence of wild men as an authentic phenomenon rather than as a diabolical invention or a pagan idolatrous fiction. Such a vision was clearly unacceptable to orthodox theology, which viewed any approximation of man to beast with abject horror. This aversion is well illustrated in the sermons of Geiler von Kaysersberg (1445-1510) published under the general title of *Die Emeis* (The Ant): in sermon number twenty he presents a classification of wild men who, like demonic creatures, are placed into five distinct categories: 1. the solitary (*solitarii*, hermits like Mary Magdalene, Mary the Egyptian, and Onophrius); 2. the wild men proper (*sacchani*, identified as satyrs); 3. the hispanics (*hispani*, wild men of foreign lands); 4. the pygmies (*piginini*); 5. the devils (*diaboli*).[2]

2 J Geiler von Kaysersberg, *Die Emeis*, Strasbourg, 1509-1519, sermon number 20, p 40, cit. by Tinland, *L'homme sauvage*, Payot, Paris, 1968, p 44, and Bernheimer, *Wildmen in the Middle Ages*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1952, p 199.

In his study, Paracelsus establishes the existence of four types of strange beings, which are very similar to man: nymphs (undines, sirens or melusines), sylphs (silvani or woodland folk), pygmies (gnomes or mountain people) and salamanders (vulcans or Etneans). But they are creatures of God not creatures of the devil and are "living proof that we are not alone",[3] for God created these wild beings in the image and the likeness of man:

3 *op cit*, V:97.

> Just as we say that man is the image and likeness of God, that is, an imitation of his form, we might also say that these people are the image and likeness of man, construed in his form. Man is not God but in appearance, though he was created similar to him. Similarly, these are not men, even though they are created in the image and likeness of man..., they cannot boast of possessing a soul like that of men, though they are like him. Just as man does not boast of being God, in spite of being made in his image and likeness as a reflection of him. In other words, man refrains from being God and wild men renounce the soul, and therefore cannot be called men."[4]

It emerges clearly from this hallucinating logic, that the presence of an intermediary space between man and beast was a very thorny issue. Paracelsus recognizes their human habits, though unrefined and coarser than man's, their flesh and blood, their mortality and their human feeding habits, as well as their wisdom to govern and to respect justice. Clearly, for Paracelsus, the wild man is redeemed, released from the disdain which appears in tales of medieval knights: they are endowed, he says, "with human reason, though they possess no soul".[5]

4 *op cit*, I:I:35.

Therefore, he reasons, they are naturally inclined to pursue personal justice in the course of their lives, and are the wisest of living creatures:

5 *op cit*, I:I:37.

> Just as man's talents and knowledge make him the closest creature to God, they are the closest and most approximate creature to man, which is why they are called people and men, and are viewed and respected as such. Consequently they are indistinguishable from men, save for their spirit and lack of soul. They are strange and marvellous creatures, and merit contemplation above all others."[6]

It is plausible that Paracelsus conceived the inhabitants of the new American colonies when he reflected on the wild man. But he was primarily concerned with achieving a better understanding of the

6 *op cit*, loc cit

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The wild woman in ecstasy: the beautiful Mary Magdalene with a hairy body and bare breasts is carried to the heavens by angels.
Drawing by Jörg Schweiger (Basel, 1533-34). O''ffentlichen Kunstsammlung (Basel), Kupferstichkabinett, 1nv, UXVI.28, Falk I, No 269.

characters which inhabited the waters, forests and mountains of Europe and formed part of her pagan folkloric tradition; by accepting the credibility of popular beliefs about wild men, nymphs and gnomes, Paracelsus was adopting the same rebellious attitude he had done as a physician, when he sought in popular cures the path towards a new science radically opposed to the Galenic tradition founded upon the four humors. We might say that Paracelsus was a genuine wild doctor: ''Universities'', he would

The wild man, transformed into a harmless element of heraldic semiotics, symbolically transfers his virility to the owner of the coat of arms. Engraving by Martin Schongauer (Germany, 1480-90). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 28.26.7.

say, "do not teach everything, which is why a physician should turn to old widows, gypsies, witches, wandering tribes, old thieves, and others who operate outside the law, and attempt to learn from them."* Though his ideas about wild men could have been used to justify the bestial nature of the American Indians, this did not apparently occur. It is true that in 1520 Paracelsus expressed his incredulity at the possibility that the people discovered in those "remote islands" might be descendants of Adam and Eve: "It is more likely that they are descended from another Adam, since one can hardly prove that they have consanguineous ties with us." He further goes on to say that these figures were born "after the great flood, and probably possess no soul: they talk like parrots... ."[7] These were fundamentally gradualist notions, which never attained the atrabilious attitude of classifying the American Indians along with insects as has been mistakenly suggested;[8] on the contrary, the gradualism implicit in the theories of Paracelsus, Caesalpinus or Bruno represented an early scientific spirit in the investigation of the relationship between man and animal.

7 Quoted from Thomas Bendyshe, 'The History of Anthropology,' in *Memoirs of the Anthropological Society of London*, I (1863-64), pp 353-54.

8 Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of the Natural Man*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982, p 23.

* Quoted in the entry "Paracelsus" of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1986. In an excellent essay on Paracelsus, Alexandre Koyre observes that in fact most of his teachings consisted of folklore, to which he would add extraordinary names, invented and adapted with a puerile and naive enthusiasm. Thus, in Paracelsus, we can find references, in addition to those mentioned, of the *Evestra, Larvae, Leffas*, and *Mumiae*, (See Alexandre Koyre, *Mystiques, spirituels, alchimistes*, Armand Colin, Paris, 1955, p 48.

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It was believed that only virgins could tame the unicorn. It is ironic that a wild woman, the incarnation of unbridled sexual desire, holds the unicorn, symbol of chastity. She represents here the Queen of Animals in an ancient card game. Engraving by Master ES (Germany, ca 1461). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 22.83.16.

Indeed, notions that attributed a bestial nature to Americans constituted a myth rather than an important trend of thought.*

However, Paracelsus's vision was considered to be a blasphemy since it undermined Christian dogma about salvation by acknowledging the existence of a figure made up of two parts: man and spirit; a mortal creature of flesh and blood who could nevertheless pass through walls without incurring damage; since this hybrid monster lacked a soul he had no cause to serve God.[9] Yet, Paracelsus does not define these beings as pernicious or harmful. He classifies them according to his own idiosyncratic and stoical vision of the cosmos, based upon the idea of a universe composed of four fundamental elements: air, earth, water and fire. Pagan folklore contained plenty of examples of fictional beings which corresponded to these elements with the exception of the last one, fire, which Paracelsus

9 *op cit*, I:II:31-37.

* See Edmundo O'Gorman, 'Sobre la naturaleza bestial del indio americano', in *Filosofía y Letras*, I and II (1941) and Juan A. Ortega y Medina, *Imagología del bueno y del mal salvaje*, Unam, Mexico, 1987, pp 29-48. For a general study on these problems see the excellent book by Peter Mason, *Deconstructing America: Representations of the Other*, Routledge, London, 1990.

attributed to the strange figures partially inspired by the Christian myth of Satan and Vulcan in Greek mythology.[10] The pygmies corresponded to earth, the silvani and sylphs to air, the nymphs to water. For Paracelsus, the true wild men were the sylphs (*Sylphen*), silvani (*Sylvestres*) or woodland folk (*Waldleut*), who were extraordinarily similar to man since they breathed the same air, were burnt by fire, drowned in water and suffocated under the earth.[11] These wild men "are coarser, rougher, taller and stronger" than the nymphs, the water folk.[12] Moreover, in contrast to nymphs and pygmies, the wild men of the woods "do not speak, that is to say, they cannot speak, in spite of having a tongue and all the faculties of speech" and in spite of "possessing a great capacity for learning"; "the woodland folk," he adds, "are like men, but more timid and fickle."[13] Sylphs can be possessed by the devil, especially the females, and consequently, "those who dare to couple with these women of the woods — not an uncommon occurrence — shall become mangy and scabby like lepers, and shall be eternally beyond human help."[14] Paradoxically, marriages between men and nymphs are possible, for they represent the means by which aquatic women and their children may obtain a soul and eternal salvation. Thus by embracing such a hope, all of marvellous stock but not of Adam's kin are able to find human love: "They are so like humans," asserts Paracelsus, "that they ought to be considered as wild men (*Wilden Menschen*), for although we say that a wolf is a wild dog and a mountain goat is a wild billy, none of these is able to marry a man."[15]

As a typical Renaissance man, Paracelsus accepts a popular ancient tradition that does not clearly distinguish man from nature, thereby contributing to the creation of a *natural history* in which humanity could form a link. Medieval Christianity either satanized the wild man by adapting him to the powerful image of the incubi and succubi who rabidly fornicated with sleeping humans, or else regarded him as an instrument of the devil employed to trick man's senses.* But Paracelsus, in contrast, attempts one of the first scientific explanations of wild men still immersed in the mists of medieval theology: he accepts the presence of an intermediary link between man and beast as contained in popular mythology to be an incontestable fact, although he does not believe, of course, in the notion of an evolutionary process linking the two.

Therefore, the first contact between the wild man and the modern scientific spirit of the Renaissance ended up as a restoration of the ancient myth, contrary to what could be expected. But whether or not this constituted the beginning of the end of a myth, destined to be shattered by the progress of science and anthropology, is questionable. Could modern rationalism and humanism terminate a myth which had survived the brunt of half a millennium of Christian theology? There was a marked interest during the 16th century for what Linnaeus called *homo ferus* (isolated humans raised since infancy by woodland beasts), for anthropomorphic beings from Asia and Africa depicted by

10 See note 10 by Pedro Gálvez, translator of the treaty of Paracelsus, *op cit.*

11 *op cit*, II:51.

12 *op cit*, II:51.

13 *op cit*, III:65.

14 *op cit*, III:67.

15 *op cit*, II:63.

* This can be seen in Kraemer and Sprenger's *Malleus Maleficarum*, Part One, III and X; Part Two, I and VIII. I use the Spanish translation: *El martillo de las brujas*, trans. M. Jímenez Montserín, Felmar, Madrid, 1976.

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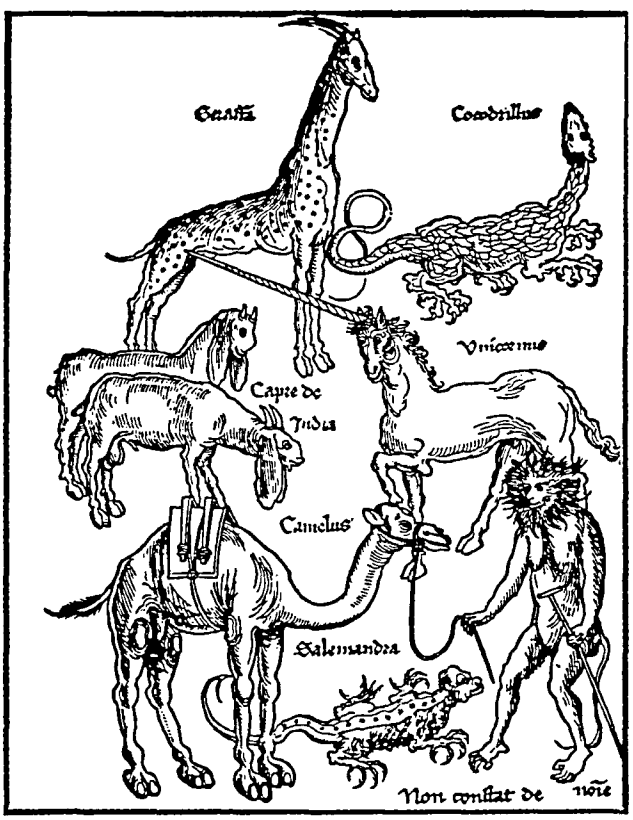
travelers (gorillas, chimpanzees, etc), as well as for monstrous children occasionally born to normal women. Gesner cites the astonishing case of a quadruped captured in the forest of Hanesbergium in the diocese of Salzburg:

> Of a reddish color, verging on blond; of a marked savagery, fleeing from men, and when able hiding in darkness. Because keeping him in captivity was not feasible because of his need to eat, he died a few days later. His back feet were different to his front ones and considerably longer..., he was captured in the year of grace 1531.[16]

The account is illustrated with a curious print. Gesner also included descriptions and prints of other humanoid beings, like the sphinx, the satyr, the aegopithecus and the cercopythecus. The latter is illustrated in a print taken from Bernard of Breidenbach's *Journey to the Holy Land*, published in 1486. He depicts a strange animal standing before a salamander, a stick in one hand and a camel's rein in the other; the complete print, which features a giraffe, a unicorn, a crocodile and an

16 K Gesner, *Historia animalium*, Zurich, 1551, Vol I, p 979.

The idea of a great chain of being sometimes included wild men, as in this engraving of 1486 (actually of a wild woman). Gesner copied this figure (reversed) to illustrate the cercopithecus in his *Historia animalium* (1551- 63).



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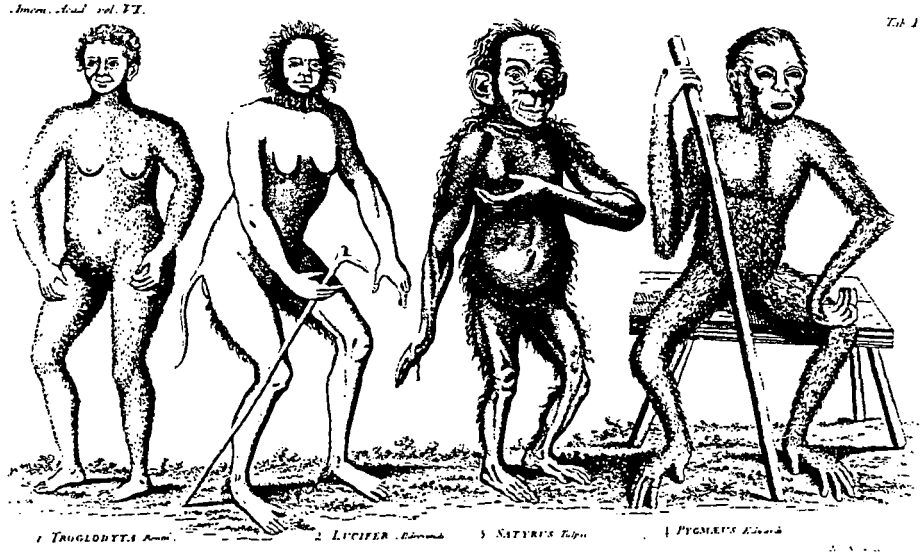

Carl von Linné and CE Hoppius included the myths of wild men in their celebrated classification of species (*Amoenitates Academicae*, Vol 6, 1789, p 76). The same wild female being reappeared from a drawing of 1486, illustrating the astonishing iconographic persistence of the myth.

Indian goat, represents a medieval vision of the great chain of being.[17] According to Gesner, the animal, "with legs, a virile phallus, and a face of human shape and proportions, could be regarded as a wild man" (although in the print it is clearly female...).[18] Of interest is not just the fact that Gesner readopts the Breidenbach print, but that three centuries after the publication of *Journey to the Holy Land*, a copy of the same print should be used by Hoppius in his famous thesis to his teacher Linnaeus, to portray *homo caudatus hirsutus*, or *Lucifer* standing next to a satyr, a pygmy and a troglodyte, all of which were classified as forms of *homo monstruosus* within the *homo sapiens* species.[19]

This remarkable example of the pervasiveness of a graphic representation of the wild man from the 15th to the 18th centuries, shows how the myth could survive the brunt of modern rationalism in scientific iconography. In fact, it was able to slip into the very heart of science and adopt new forms of expression.

The persistence of the myth was fostered by the scientific pursuit for explanations of monstrous or prodigious phenomena which were not based upon divine will or Satanic illusion. In his famous treatise, the surgeon Ambroise Paré (1509-1590) established a series of explanations for the existence of monsters, including those believed to be of divine or diabolical

17 See the 1498 Spanish edition of *Viaje a Tierra Santa* in the facsimile reproduction of the Instituto Bibliográfico Hispánico, Madrid 1974.

18 K Gesner, *op cit*, Vol I, p 970.

19 Carl von Linne and C E Hoppius, *Amoenitates Academicae*, Erlangen, 1789, Vol 6, p 76.

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origin: excess, insufficiency, mix or decay of semen, the narrowness of the womb, knocks to the abdomen or the incorrect posture of a mother, hereditary or accidental illnesses and — inevitably — the imagination.[20] Paré exhibits a miscellaneous gallery of monstrosities in which cases of crosses between humans and animals attributed to a mix of semen abound: "These are the products of sodomites and atheists who mate unnaturally with the beasts, and create all manner of monsters repugnant and horrible to the eye or to conversation."[21] One hairy maiden, in particular, is construed as typical of a monster of the imagination, since the mother imagines or fixedly contemplates some weird thing during conception or while the child is still unformed; he quotes Damascene who knew of "a woman, as hairy as a bear, deformed and repulsive at birth, owing to the fact that her mother stared too hard at an effigy of Saint John covered in untanned furs, an image of which lay bound to the legs of her bed while she conceived.[22] Thus an erotic imagination was potentially lethal, an awesome Pandora's Box.

20 Ambroise Paré, *Mostruos y prodigios*, Siruela, Madrid, 1987.

21 Paré, *op cit*, XIX:64.

22 *op cit*, IX:46.

Ambroise Paré's detailed explanations started to narrow the gap separating man from natural beast with real flesh-and-bone monsters: nature seemed to go berserk when women gave birth to serpents, dogs or bicephalous children; when the human-like figures of mermaids and Nile Tritons grew out of the water; and when pigs and mares mated with anthropocephalous animals. In contrast to Paracelsus, Paré did not believe that these beings belonged to a species parallel to Adam and Eve's line: these were deviations from the normal course of nature or counter-natural phenomena.*

Daily coexistence with monstrous beings of different sorts must have surely provoked misgivings and conjecture regarding the causal link between natural phenomena and human identity. Cross-breeds often placed notions of individuality in crisis, as was the case with the bicephalous beings. In 1605, the French anatomist Jean Riolan — known, among other things, for his opposition to Harvey's theses on the circulation of blood — published his collection of case studies of double monsters who lived at the turn of the 13th century of which the following is an example:

> He was joined at the stomach, and possessed two heads and four hands with common lower parts. The king ensured it was carefully brought up and educated, and was especially keen it learn music; not only was marvelous progress made, but it also learnt many languages. These two bodies did not act in concord, and had different wills, and often fought when one disliked what was liked by the other; sometimes one would listen to the advice of the other. Most interesting was the fact that when their thighs and kidneys hurt them, both felt it; but when one of them was pinched, or hurt in the upper half, only one would feel it. This difference was further evident at the time of death, when one of the bodies died several days before the other,

* On this subject see: Jurgis Baltrusaitis, *Aberrations. Essais sur la legende del formes*, Flammarion, Paris, 1983. Jules Berger de Xivrey, *Traditions tératologiques ou Recits de l'Antiquité et du Moyen Age en Occident sur quelques points de la fable, du merveilleux et de l'histoire naturelle...*, Imprimerie Royale, Paris, 1836. Friedman, John Block, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1981. Patrick Tort, *L'ordre et les monstres*, Le Sycomore, Paris, 1980.

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and the survivor was left to languish slowly while the other half rotted away. This monster lived 28 years and died under the reign of John, a Scottish earl.[23]

23 Quoted by Patrick Tort, *op cit*, pp 7-8.

Ambroise Paré, who considered excessive semen to be responsible for cases of two bodies joined together, followed Aristotle in determining the number of individuals inside the body of a monster by counting the number of hearts.[24] The cercopithecus cited above also posed problems of identity:

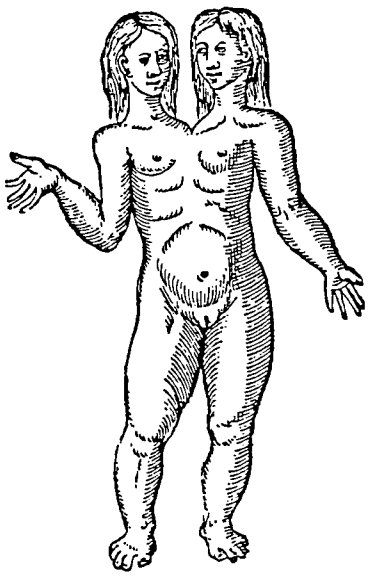
24 Paré, *op cit*, IV:29.

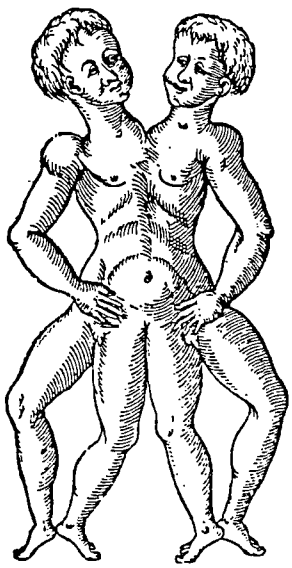
> He loves women and children just like his countrymen, and when he can escape from his shackles, he tries to be reunited with them. He is nevertheless a fierce beast, but of such intelligence that one might say that in this regard men are inferior to him: certainly not our fellow citizens, but perhaps the barbarians who inhabit the hostile climes, like the Ethiopians, the Numids, and Lapps.[25]

25 K Gesner, *op cit*, Vol I, p 970.

Also worth mentioning here is Aristotle's explanation that simians, baboons, and cinocephales "possess a nature, shared by both men and

Ambroise Paré *Des monstres et prodiges*, Paris, 1573.





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quadrupeds''.[26]

The colonization of America was also a great part of the medieval theological effort to recover those spaces lost to modernization; and in many ways, too, recognition of the new American land and culture was a highly favorable sign of the modern age for the Europeans. Columbus fanatically believed that his venture was a vital part of the universal expansion of Christianity and, when describing the American man, he had in mind the kind of questions that his contemporaries posed: ''In these islands I have not discovered monstrous men, as many believed, but instead a people of a very pleasant deference....''[27] The myth of the wild man was shattered before the reality of the real American wild man: they were not hairy, but intelligent and beautiful. However, it must be added that the images brought to us by Columbus are contradictory, for his descriptions also leave room for a wild man resurrecting the long and rich mythical tradition of Caliban, the Caribbean cannibal. Columbus says: ''Thus I have not found a trace of monsters, except on a Caribbean island...'' The Caribbeans were ferocious cannibals, ''no less ill-proportioned than the rest, except that they are accustomed to wearing their hair long like women''.[28] In spite of all the medieval imagery that the American colonizers carried in their heads — peopled with lost paradises, mermaids, amazons, giants — the daily reality of a life shared with the men and women of the New World gradually imposed itself. The adventure of a gentleman from Savona which occurred during Columbus' second voyage is very illustrative:

> ... having captured an extremely pretty Caribbean woman, which the Admiral had offered me, and — after having taken her to my cabin in a state of nakedness as was her custom — I was overcome with the desire to satisfy my pleasure. When I wanted to come on to her, she refused and scratched me in such a way that I almost wished I had never started. But upon seeing this (to tell the story to its end), I took a rope and gave her such a hiding that she let out some extraordinary shrieks, which you had to hear to believe. Finally we reached such an understanding that I can say it seemed as if she had been brought up in a school for prostitutes.[29]

The wild woman was basically nothing other than a lustful creature: one had to know how to treat her with measured violence — as a master and as a man — to discover in her heart the human sweetness of a profane love. The monster of the Caribbean melted in the arms of the Conquistador.

The main tendency was to assimilate American humanity to the concept of barbarity, rather than that of wild men, although there was clearly a great confusion over the two terms.[30]

Bartholomé de las Casas, for example, considers wild men as one of four species of barbarian (the third kind):

> The first, taking the general meaning of the word, denotes any kind of people with an oddness about their opinions or customs, yet who require neither policing nor prudence for guidance. The second kind are lacking the class of appropriate languages that can be expressed with characters and letters, as the English once did... The third kind of barbarian, owing to their perverse customs, the coarseness of their wit, and their brutal inclinations are like

26 *De Animalibus*, II:4; See translation into French: *Histoire des animaux* (I-IV), by P. Louis, Belles-Lettres, Paris, 1964.

27 Christóbal Colón, *Textos y documentos completos*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1982, p 144.

28 *op cit*, pp 144 and 142.

29 M de Cuneo, Letter to Annari of the 28th of October 1495, *Raccolta colombiana*, III, volume 2, pp 95-197 cit. by T Todorov, *La conquete de l'Amérique. La question de l'autre*, Seuil, Paris, 1982, pp 53-54.

30 See Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of the Natural Man*.

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Mediaeval wild folk evolve to exemplify natural and original tenderness, and furthemore, they appear as a happy family in a paradisiac land.
Engraving by Master BXG (Germany, 1470-90), Albertina, Vienna.

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> the wild beasts that inhabit the fields, lacking cities, houses, police, laws, and rites and tracts of *iure gentium*, but go about as *palantes*, as is said in Latin, which means that they rob and use force, as the Goths and the Alani once did, and now say there are those whom in Asia we call Arabs and who in Africa we call Alarabs. And from these we can understand the words of Aristotle, that since it is lawful to hunt wild beasts, so it is lawful to make war with them defending ourselves from those who harm us, procuring their submission to the human police.[31]

These assertions form part of the complex discussion over the supposed incapacity of the Indian, which provoked the confrontation between las Casas and Sepúlveda, and which has been intensely studied.[32] What I wish to point out here is not the widely documented way European notions of wildness and barbarity were employed to qualify the American people; I am rather interested in the reverse process: the solvent quality of the American reality (and, in general, the mass of information proceeding from travelers of the Renaissance) in the myth of the wild man. One could say that, while Europe colonized American 'savages', these in turn colonized the European myth of the wild man and contributed to its transformation. During the 15th and 16th centuries, an important transition took place, not in the structure of the myth of the wild man so much as in the space which it occupied. As travelers' accounts and anatomists' studies limited the conditions for the veridical existence of sylphs and nymphs, so these wild men were obliged to migrate, and change *habitat*. At the same time, by undermining the traditional foundations of theology, the Renaissance opened a new ideological and theoretical domain for them. Theology, as we have seen, did not admit a space for the wild man, only the invocation of whom threatened a human community which drew its cohesion from a promise of eternal salvation. Consequently, the *homo sylvestris* remained imprisoned inside the camp of popular imagery, literary adventures and art, where he was kept alive in the figure of a natural human being, an inhabitant of the woods and of earth's unexplored corners. This wild medieval man survived as a tangible and physical reality; in contrast to the wild man who takes form in the Renaissance and evolves until it reaches — in the Enlightenment — a completely spiritual, ideal and ghostly character, whose true existence is no longer credible. The twist is interesting: medieval wild men were, just like monsters, considered to be real and threatening realities. Modern science and travelers at the dawn of the colonial era, by revealing the inexistence of these beings, opened a new space, one which was totally and consciously imaginary and fabulous. Why believe that a demythification of the wild man took place? The fact remains that the Renaissance wild man who ended in enlightened rationalism is far more fabulous than the medieval *homo sylvestris*. Although modernity believed increasingly less in its physical existence, its ideal and spiritual reality influenced Western culture far more than had it been made of flesh and bone.

Paracelsus's attitude provides us with various clues for understanding this strange transition of the myth: the Renaissance doctor acknowledges the empirical existence of wild beings in the mythological tradition, but at the same time is opening a theoretical and rational space for them within

31 Bartoloméo de las Casas, *Opúsculos, cartas y memoriales*, Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, Madrid, (Vol 110), 1958, pp 307-8.

32 Hanke, Lewis, *Aristotle and the American Indian: Study in Race Prejudice in the Modern World*, Regnery, Chicago, 1959.

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modern thought. The opposition between *mythos* and *logos* is not as simplistic as has been sometimes claimed, neither is the course marking the shift from the clouds of mythology to rational thought so clearly drawn. In reality, the contrast between *mythos* and *logos* is quite deceptive: a careful look at the evolution of certain myths shows us how easily they are able to adopt a rational form and to shed religious and ritual wrappings, not unlike Schelling's demand for "a mythology of reason".[33] The history of the myth of the wild man of the 16th century shows us not his decadence but, on the contrary, his revitalization and relocation. The myth of the wild man found a niche in the very kernel of new forms of humanist thought, for which some form of representing *otherness* — in a modern world more inclined towards defining the individual identity of the modern man — became indispensable. This complex tradition cannot but help remind us of one of the earliest classical forms in which the problem was circumscribed: when Plato, talking through Socrates in *Phaedo*, jeers at the rhetorical seers who claimed to have found the rational codes of myths. Socrates purposely satirizes the frivolity of those who, having deciphered the mythologem of Boreas and Oreithya (she is thrown headlong by the North wind and her death becomes a kidnapping), attempted to unravel the phantasmagories of "the hypocentaurs and the chimera, the throng of gorgons and pegasus, and the multitude of strange and terrifying monsters." Socrates — who revered the traditional forms of myths — then warned that "it will be a long time before the incredulous can unfold his *wild knowledge* and provide a credible version."[34] This *agroikos sofia*, this wild thought of the incredulous contrasted with the precept of the famous delphic inscription which advised one to *know oneself*. Therefore, Socrates prefers — instead of worrying about distant and faraway monsters — to contemplate himself: "I want to know if I am a more complex and furious monster than Typhon, or a creature simpler and sweeter with a part of divine nature... ."* History has shown that the explanation of monsters and myths is intrinsically linked to the definition and the wisdom of oneself: the I and the Other are inseparable. The ancient sophists and Greek rhetoricians with their wild knowledge, their *agroikos sofia*, were correct: explaining myths is not a useless task.

33 Ernst Cassirer, *La philosophie des formes symboliques. 2: La pensée mytique*, Minuit, Paris, 1972, p 18.

34 *Phaedo*, 229 D-E.

Translated from the Spanish by Carl T. Berrisford

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* *Op cit* 230. For a Neo-Kantian thought see Ernst Cassirer, *op cit*, p 16. A different interpretation of this passage of *Phaedo* is that in Marcel Detienne, *La invención de la mitología*, Península, Barcelona, 1985, pp 106ss. In *Paideia*, (Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico, 1962, p 970n), Jaeger observes that the word *agroikos* became the most common word for lack of culture, as expressed in Aristotle (*Rhetoric*, III, 7, 1408-32, and *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 7, 1108-26), as well as in Teophrastus (*Characters*, IV).

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